

**DARK HISTORY: The Colonization of Liberia—Philanthropy or Racism?
How Slavery and Black Laws Led to the Founding of Liberia
By Lynn Arnold**

“That we hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”¹

Do these words sound familiar? Such phrases invoke thoughts of a young aspiring nation being founded on freedom and equality. It may be surprising to note that the above passage was written one hundred years *after* our own Declaration of Independence by people who desperately wanted to *leave* the United States. Their decree below illustrates the intense desire of many black Americans to escape this country in the 1800’s.

“And WHEREAS, In the United States of North America many of our people have been debarred by law from the rights and privileges of freemen, and even now public sentiment-more powerful than law-frowns us down. We are made a separate and distinct class, and against us many avenues to improvement and eminence are effectually closed. Strangers from all lands, of a color different from ours, are preferred before us. Therefore, Resolved, That we continue to seek an asylum from this deep degradation by going to Liberia, on the western coast of Africa, where we will be permitted to more fully exercise and improve those faculties which impart to man his dignity, and to evince to all who despise, ridicule and oppress our race, that we possess with them a common nature, and are susceptible of equal refinement and equal advancement in all that dignifies man, and that we are capable of self government.”
~Liberian Exodus Arkansas Colony Delegates in Helena, Arkansas, November 23, 1877²

African Americans indeed, did not share the same liberties as those of European heritage, nor had they ever received equal treatment. While immigrants were arriving in this land of opportunity and hope, others were enslaved against their will, struggling against a history of prejudice and racial hatred that had been passed down for generations.

On a global scale, nothing quite equals the forced migration of people across the Atlantic with the slave trade. The repercussions of this travesty are felt today on both sides of that ocean. It is estimated that during the four hundred years slavery was in full force, between eleven and fifteen million Africans were shipped all over the Americas; approximately one million arrived in North America alone.³ When Europeans started trafficking humans for economic gain, it involved a partnership with Africans. Many were more than willing to sell their fellow countrymen due to the divisiveness between the numerous ethnic tribes and the benefits this trade brought. Goods unknown in Africa soon became more valuable than lives. Meanwhile, the victims of this inhumane market were doomed to lose their families, their

friends, their culture, and their personal freedoms, which began with the horrifying experience in the cargo hold of a slave ship. An eye witness account follows:

“The slaves, male and female, are crowded into the *middle* passage,” says Sir George Collier, who lately commanded a squadron on the coast of Africa, “so as not to give the power to move, and are linked to one another by the legs or neck, never to be unfettered while the voyage lasts, or till their iron shall have fretted the flesh almost to the bone; forced under a deck, as I have seen them, not *thirty inches in height*, breathing an atmosphere the most *putrid*, with little food and less water. In this *loathsome prison*, *thousands* die in the *ravings of despair*, and many when let out to breath the *balmy air*, rather than return to their dungeons, plunge themselves into the ocean to sleep among its pearls and corals.”⁴

Obstacles of this ghastly journey included seasickness, rats, poor food quality, and lack of both sanitation and ventilation.⁵ The rancid environment would rapidly become a breeding ground for disease, and it is estimated up to one- third of the transported slaves died en route.⁶

While the first slave ship to this nation arrived in 1620 with the Dutch, slavery was not very popular in North America until England had a monopoly on this practice. At that time, England actually *encouraged* the slave trade in all her colonies where additional bodies were considered a necessity. England quickly became the largest slave trader in the world, supplying the Americas, Barbados, and Jamaica.⁷ Thus, this small American settlement swiftly developed a dependency on the extra workers, especially in the southern states where labor-intensive crops such as tobacco and cotton were grown. Consequently, by the mid 1700’s, demand was high and slavers were flourishing in a lucrative, international business.⁸

During the early 1800’s, however, slave owners were alarmed that the mounting numbers of African Americans would skyrocket if not controlled in some way. As black populations increased, so did the possibility of rebellion, known as *insurrections*. In 1791, reports of successful slave uprisings in Haiti reached the United States. There, the captives on the island had triumphantly revolted against their masters.⁹ Rumors abounded that the new leader of Haiti was targeting the United States next.¹⁰ In 1800, fears of insurgency were confirmed when a group of whites stopped a slave rebellion in Virginia; thirty-five slaves were hung. During 1810, two different insurrections occurred in Louisiana. Again in 1816, yet another uprising transpired in Virginia.¹¹ Free blacks were considered a danger in the South, as it was believed that those liberated could cause the slaves to become resentful and incite rebellion. The entire system was at risk.¹²

Meanwhile, public opinion was beginning to wane at the thought of one man owning another. Those in direct opposition to this practice were known as *abolitionists* because their goal was to do away with slavery. Abolitionists realized the problem was not going to disappear, yet they deeply desired a better quality of life for African Americans. At that time, equality was a dream, even in the north. Laws severely limited opportunities for free blacks. What good was freedom without the option of schooling, training, or jobs? What kind of life was achievable if it was against the law to gather socially in groups larger than seven? These regulations barred certain demographics from having the same possibilities extended to others. Logic soon dictated that African Americans would progress more in a specific location of their own, where they would *not* be discriminated against due to their race.¹³

The subject of colonizing another region was not a new idea. Various notions of relocating the African Americans had been entertained since the 1700's. In fact, in 1787, a British company started a colony in West Africa that would eventually become known as Sierra Leone. It was a place for free blacks from England and the West Indies as well as fugitive American slaves who had fought for the British during the Revolutionary War. Thomas Jefferson had even believed that African Americans should be sent somewhere beyond the boundaries of this nation. During his presidency, he had inquired with the Sierra Leone Company about the possibility of receiving freed American slaves there. His plea was rejected, however, as the business was about to dissolve. In 1808, the territory was conceded to the British government.¹⁴ During that same year, legislation was passed in the United States forbidding the *importation of slaves to America from other countries*.¹⁵ Yet, domestic slavery was still allowed to thrive in the South, as it was still up to the states to decide individually if the practice was acceptable, an issue that was dividing the country further with each passing day.

Ironically, two opposing groups, slave holders and abolitionists alike, would end up uniting with clergymen to work towards one common cause: the colonization of African Americans. The suggestion of forming an actual *colonization society* in America has been attributed to Reverend Robert Finley. He penned his original thoughts to a friend, and subsequently garnered support from other ministers and influential individuals. Sufficient interest warranted an initial meeting on December 21, 1816, and the

official formation of what became known as the American Colonization Society transpired on January 1, 1817. This organization's objective was to establish a colony in Africa in which to send free blacks from the USA. Slave owners backed the proposition, claiming blacks would have opportunities that would never be present here. Clergy and abolitionists supported this move in the name of humanity. What a philanthropic idea--to offer oppressed souls the chance to live in a place where they would not be judged by their skin color! The African Americans could form their own Utopian society based on democracy, promote Christianity to the "Dark Continent", and flourish without the destructive effects of racism. It was the perfect plan.

From its inception, the concept of a colonization society was met with mixed reviews. Finley had caught the attention of Paul Cuffee, a successful businessman who owned his own shipping company, who also happened to be the son of a former slave and a Native American woman. Cuffee had fought for black rights in Massachusetts. He was also enchanted with Sierra Leone, having both funded and transported a group of African American settlers there in 1811. He had hoped to move there himself before the War of 1812 soured his plans. Cuffee was thrilled at Finley's proposal, and was eager to share it with other free blacks. He contacted his friend, James Forten, another free black businessman, who shared Cuffee's enthusiasm. Forten would go on to hold a general assembly of 3,000 African Americans in a Philadelphia church in mid January of 1817, to discuss colonization. The reaction of those free blacks, however, was not anticipated. Much to the dismay of Forten and Cuffee, not a single soul wanted to go to Africa.¹⁶ The majority of free blacks in the north were incensed at the thought of leaving their home, however colonization gave hope to others in the south. For many, returning to ancestral Africa was like going to the "promised land". Most of those who would emigrate would come from southern states.

Upon closer inspection of the majority of members in the American Colonization Society, ulterior motives are revealed. It is quite startling to note that the president along with twelve of the seventeen original officers of the ACS were slaveholders who preached *against* the slave trade in *Africa*. Bushrod Washington, the nephew of George Washington and the first President of the American Colonization Society, was actively engaged in selling his slaves *within* our borders. Racist motives were expressed at

the very first meeting, which was documented but not publicized. Elias B. Caldwell, Secretary of the Supreme Court of the United States, had the following to say about African Americans,

*“...if they must remain in their present situation, keep them in the lowest state of degradation and ignorance.”*¹⁷

In fact, three-quarters of the society possessed slaves themselves and did *not* act out of concern for their fellow man, but rather out of self-interest. In addition to decreasing the likelihood of uprising, they believed that those slaves left in the United States would increase in value.¹⁸ To the general public, however, the American Colonization Society was promoted as a benevolent group with only the best interests of blacks in mind.

Over time, however, true intentions were revealed. David Walker, a free man of color, appealed to his colored brethren in 1830:

*“This land which we have watered with our tears and our blood, is now our mother country, and we are well satisfied to stay here where wisdom abounds and the gospel is free.”*¹⁹

In 1832, William Lloyd Garrison, a prominent abolitionist who sent out the anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, was perplexed by the thought of evangelizing a continent by sending illiterate, degraded human beings who had never been taught habits of industry.²⁰ Curious, he went on to inspect and study the efforts of the ACS. He came to vehemently contest it, recording his multitude of reasons in a book.²¹ By the 1830's, most abolitionists would strongly oppose the American Colonization Society.

If there were any doubt as to the character of the ACS, one incident reveals all. Nothing quite illustrates the degree of racism in the 1800's better than the case against Connecticut teacher, Prudence Crandall in 1833. At the time, Connecticut boasted many instructional institutions and was heralded as *the* state where education was most highly valued. Ms. Crandall began a school for girls and experienced great success and community support. Then a young African American woman approached Crandall about furthering her education so that she could instruct black children. At first, Ms. Crandall refused, but soon her convictions led her to do otherwise. She admitted this young woman and the town was outraged; white families immediately pulled their daughters out of Crandall's school.²²

Miss Crandall then decided to start a school for “little misses of color” from the region. Ads were placed in the anti-slavery newspaper and she had a small following. Once again, the reaction was harsh.

Town meetings were held to pass new laws restricting schools to state residents only. Stiff fines were to be imposed on anyone who came from out of state. If unable to pay the fee, the individual was to be whipped “to the naked body”²³. Miss Crandall’s school began, and the building was repeatedly defaced. Manure was placed on the steps and in the school’s well (the lone water source), windows were broken, rotten eggs were thrown at the outside walls. Grocers refused to sell goods to anyone associated with the school, and people taunted and jeered those who attended. Life was difficult for the students, who spent most of their time in the shelter of the school, rather than venture out in public where they were unwelcome. The “Christian community”, composed of many colonizationists, pursued further action.²⁴ Miss Crandall was put in jail for educating children who had the wrong colored skin. She was taken to trial and found guilty. Eventually, she would win an appeal, but it mattered little. Once again, the community “spoke” and again the school was vandalized. This time, however, the magnitude of damage far surpassed prior incidents: ninety windows, some walls and even pieces of furniture were shattered.²⁵ Safety was now a frightening concern and the school was closed immediately. Crandall would leave the state shortly thereafter. This tragic story of being imprisoned for providing education illustrates the severity of prejudice existing in the nation, even in the north. The fact that the American Colonization Society supported the opposition²⁶ to Miss Crandall’s school speaks volumes. The ACS had *no desire to improve the condition of African Americans in this nation*, but rather focused all attention on removing them to Africa.²⁷

The American Colonization Society relied solely on private donations from 1816-1818. Once funding was in place in 1818, the first agents, Mills and Burgess, were sent to acquire the territory in Western Africa, near Sierra Leone. Paradoxically, this was also known as the “slave coast” with its first documentation of slavery in 1503.²⁸ It is estimated that sixty million West Africans were captured, forty million of which died en route.²⁹ Many of the indigenous tribes were involved in the slave trade for their livelihood. After searching the vicinity, the agents decided upon an area off the coast of Sierra Leone, known as Sherbo Island. Negotiations were held and the land secured.³⁰ Now more revenue was all that was needed.

In 1819, the ACS received a financial break when new legislation went into effect. With the advent of international slavery laws, now the government found themselves in a precarious position. Once a slave ship was detained, the law demanded the captured slaves to remain in the U.S. until they were deported to their homeland. However, knowing the country of origin was problematic. President James Monroe, a slave owner himself, needed a place to put these individuals, as he did not intend to keep them indefinitely on American soil. This dilemma would bring a cooperative effort between the ACS and the US government. The ACS had already identified land in Africa, thus the president could have a location to send these recaptured slaves. Congress appropriated \$100,000 to the effort, and the government sent supplies in which to provide accommodations for three hundred. With the government's backing, the ACS could now afford to send their first emigrants. Hence, the colony would not only harbor free blacks, but also those rescued from slave ships, that were referred to as "*recaptureds*".³¹ In 1820, Congress would pass an act declaring the slave trade to be piracy under penalty of death. England, France, and other Christian nations would join this effort. While the world was hopeful to exterminate this practice of human bondage, there was one major oversight: Portugal and Spain, two major participants in the industry, had not been approached to cooperate on this matter, and their slaving continued.³²

In 1820, the American Colonization Society sent its first voyage to Africa, led by Reverend Samuel Bacon on the ship, *Elizabeth*, chartered by the government. Emigrants were required to be free blacks. Those who were emancipated tended to have lighter skin tones. While in today's society those of African lineage are found in a range of shades, two hundred years ago that was not the case in Africa. The native Africans had very *dark* skin. Thus, when the African Americans arrived, (to be called Americo-Liberians) the difference between the two groups was drastic.³³ Eighty-six free blacks went on this expedition, prepared to build housing for others once they got to their destination. Unfortunately, they met with disaster. Unbeknownst to them at the time, malaria and yellow fever thrived on the swampy Sherbo Island. Upon the first three weeks of arrival, twenty-two settlers and all three agents were dead. Those remaining were relocated to Freetown, in Sierra Leone, until another region could be established.

A second party was sent in 1821. The new agents decided to look for land south of Sierra Leone, in an area known as Cape Mesurado. After months of searching, they met with a native leader, King Peter, who agreed to sell the land for goods such as rum, clothes, wine glasses, guns, and mirrors. There was a cultural misunderstanding, however, and King Peter reneged on the deal. The exasperated agents did not know that there was usually a council of many kings needed before such decisions were made. After much time and energy had been spent in identifying this place, the agents were not about to give up so easily. They allegedly resorted to putting a gun to King Peter's head to finally reach an arrangement.³⁴ The ACS had finally acquired a new home for African Americans, in the land that would eventually be called *Liberia*, originating from the Latin word *liber*, meaning a free man.³⁵ The capital would become known as *Monrovia*, a tribute to President James Monroe.³⁶

While Africa may have been in their bloodlines, the freed slaves who were sent there had no real ties to the continent. They had been immersed into a Christian American way of life, some for generations. Missionaries played a large role, as converting the "dark continent" to Christianity was another ambition. Therefore, the settlers did not try to assimilate back into the African culture anymore than the U.S. colonists did with the Native Americans. Instead, it was a clash of customs with different sets of values, many in direct contradiction to one another.

The indigenous Africans were into animism and other religions based on nature; the settlers looked down upon that, being instructed in the Christian religion. The natives exposed much of their bodies, wearing minimal clothing in the heat and humidity of the tropics; the settlers considered the native dress sinful. They wore Victorian styles they had brought from the temperate climate they left, consisting of pants, shirts, and ties for men; long skirts and dresses for women. As impractical as the clothing was, the church had ingrained certain standards. Many of the Africans had plural wives; the settlers viewed anything other than monogamy in a marriage as wrong. The indigenous lived in basic huts made from natural materials easily obtained. The settlers set out to recreate the homes they left in the South. Many had taken part in building grand mansions, so these were replicated with great workmanship.³⁷ The Africans ate an assortment of food previously unknown; the settlers did not take to this new cuisine.

Producing their own food became an issue, as there was severe resistance to any type of agricultural work among the Americo-Liberians. Any occupation associated with farms, plantations, fields, or sawmills was considered a slave job and the immigrants refused to have anything to do with those. This was enabled for three main reasons: 1) the ACS welfare policy that provided supplies for new arrivals for six months was never strictly enforced, 2) the malaria and yellow fever were believed to hit those who worked outside, and 3) the master-slave relationship was the way of life the settlers had learned before arriving in Liberia. If an individual could hire a native to do his work, even simple house chores, it was done. These factors would negatively impact the new land's ability to be self-reliant through producing their own sustenance. Instead, they opted to trade with other groups in the area, or make requests from the American Colonization Society. This decision would render the colony utterly dependent on others for food and put them in a risky position, as trading became the main source of national income.³⁸ Even fifty years after the colony was founded, the refusal to work the land continued. At that time, the new arrivals noted the discrepancy between the availability of fresh meat, fruit, and vegetables in Sierra Leone and the lack thereof in Liberia.³⁹

In addition to the deficiency of agriculture, other settlers and agents reported a lack of work ethic by many of the former slaves who came to Liberia. Since the majority of the active colonization societies were located in the South, most of those sent to Liberia had only known the only life based on the master-servant relationship. For generations, they had been taken care of and provided with their food, clothing, shelter. Apparently some associated freedom with freedom from work. One such observer was Samson Ceasar, a colonist from Virginia, wrote to his former master about the indigenous people being plentiful and doing most of the work for the Americo-Liberians. After a few months, his correspondence expressed his frustrations with some of his fellow countrymen who were not productive members.

*"I am afraid that our country never will improve as it ought until the people in the United States keep their slaves that they have raised dumb as horses at home and send those here who will be a help to improve the country."*⁴⁰

When these former slaves went to Africa, they managed to recreate the life they had once left. This time, however, there was one difference: Now, *they* were the ones in control. Upon arrival, they viewed the

rest of the Africans as “heathens” and “savages”.⁴¹ In addition to religion, dress, marriage practices, and food, the American freed slaves had witnessed Africans *selling one another* into slavery, a detested practice. This contributed to the feeling that they were, indeed, superior to their African counterparts. Ironically, these pioneers would perpetuate the conditions of the environment they had just fled: they enslaved and exploited the local population, they forced their lifestyle and religion upon indigenous and *recaptured*s alike, and the natives were not allowed to be citizens. In February of 1834, just twelve years after the first colony began, one new arrival to the settlement reported that many “have got rich” while others suffered, and those who could afford it used the natives as slaves.⁴² Another new arrival wrote, “...*here you can rule instead of being ruled...*”⁴³

As this region was also a slaver’s haven, the new colony was met with violent opposition by many of the chiefs who had become wealthy as a result of the slave trade. The new settlers were considered a serious threat. This would induce the natives to repeatedly make war on the protectorate, and frequent attacks would become a part of life.⁴⁴ Modern weaponry and the occasional assistance from the US Navy would save the young colony.

These were indeed stumbling blocks to the new settlement, but they were certainly not the greatest obstacles. One need only look at ship manifests and death records to tell the story of the settlers’ utmost challenge: tropical disease. Few pioneers survived beyond five years.⁴⁵ In the first eight years, 38% of the population was lost to disease.⁴⁶ From 1820-1843, 4,454 emigrants had arrived in Liberia. 49% of those had died of illnesses, and 12% returned to the United States due to what they considered “intolerable conditions”.⁴⁷ These afflictions quickly became a major deterrent in attracting free blacks to Africa.

The high mortality rate was a huge concern, but nothing could have more long-term consequences than the segregation and class system that was ever present. *Recaptured*s were encouraged to start their own community from the beginning, causing division.⁴⁸ Natives were treated as inferiors who were not allowed to vote. Americo-Liberians, a tiny fraction of the population, had all the rights, which gave them far more power. There were even numerous reports of Americo-Liberian officials working with slave traders to support their necessity on trading in order for their economy to survive.

Emigrants would continue to come annually for twenty-five years after the founding of the colony. Numbers increased significantly after the 1831 rebellion led by Nat Turner. In that uprising, sixty whites were massacred, which led to white mobs killing two hundred blacks, many who were innocent.⁴⁹ As a result, further oppressive laws were passed.⁵⁰ In 1832, the ACS would resettle 796 emigrants, more than any other year in its history. The Maryland division of the ACS would send another 146 itself.⁵¹

Liberia's coast was rife with slave traders, and statistics would show that the slave trade between Africa and America "was carried out as actively in 1847 as from 1798-1810".⁵² In fact, the ACS was accused of aiding human traffickers, leading factions of the ACS to break away. Four different states would orchestrate their own societies for colonization and set up new territories in the region during the 1830's.⁵³ This deflection of monetary support was a serious blow to the colonization effort.

In the 1840's, while the ACS was becoming less and less financially viable, Liberia's economy was growing. The commonwealth traded with many European ships, mostly British and French, and taxed them accordingly. Then, the British discovered that Liberia, while greatly assisted by the American government, was technically *not* a colony of the United States. Hence, they refused to pay any more tariffs, insisting it did not recognize the right of the American Colonization Society to collect duties.⁵⁴ These measures would cripple the young land whose tax base was the major income source for its government and officials. Revenues were needed to purchase food, so the situation would become dire. Liberian officials thus requested independence from the American Colonization Society. Despite the reluctance of several ACS officers, the Board would approve this appeal with some stipulations, including reserving the right to continue to send both emigrants and *recaptureds* there. Liberian Independence Day was declared on July 26, 1847.⁵⁵ Accordingly, the ACS contributions would drastically decrease, which would impact the number of colonists arriving in Liberia.

Independence did not solve the financial problems. No longer were provisions delivered by the ACS, which meant the welfare system begun by the society was no longer sustained. The U.S. government refused to acknowledge Liberia as a sovereign nation. Disease, dependence, and corruption continued to infiltrate the new nation. The Liberian government had not made education a priority and the result was

illiteracy in the poverty stricken culture. At the time of independence, ninety percent of the population was illiterate and ten percent were functionally illiterate.⁵⁶ The only schools were run by missionaries and churches from the United States. Of the students who were fortunate enough to receive instruction, sixty-five percent were Americo-Liberians, thirty-four percent were *recaptureds*, and one percent was indigenous.⁵⁷ Due to its involvement in education, Christianity became the main religion, and the church became associated with the aristocracy.

Resurgence in emigration would happen again in the 1850's, after the passing of the *Fugitive Slave Act* that essentially ensured that runaway slaves leave the country or face arrest.⁵⁸ The *Dred-Scott* decision had declared that blacks had no rights in the United States.⁵⁹ More and more African Americans saw less and less opportunities. By the beginning of the Civil War, thirteen thousand African Americans had settled in Liberia. They remained a distinct minority, however, greatly outnumbered by indigenous Africans on their plot of land consisting of approximately two hundred fifty miles of coastline going a few miles inland.⁶⁰

After the Civil War, with the end of slavery in sight, black interest in relocating declined sharply. At the same time, so did the cash flow of the American Colonization Society, as most of its benefactors had died. One man, William Coppinger, kept the association going. Between 1865 and 1870, he mustered up the remaining funds to send 2,394 emigrants, more than would be sent in the next thirty years. African American interest would peak again in the 1870's and 1890's due to Jim Crow Laws and racial tensions, but by that time the ACS was largely deficient in resources. In 1892, after the death of Coppinger, the group would stop resettling blacks altogether.⁶¹

All throughout the existence of the nation, Liberia was plagued with accusations of slavery and human injustices. Early on it dealt with frequent allegations of abetting the slave trade. In the 1905, that changed to a different sort of human trafficking involving Spanish planters on the island of Fernando Po. The island needed workers for various cocoa plantations. Americo-Liberian leaders were involved in shipping young men to work as laborers. They would receive no salary until their return to Liberia, while officials got rich. In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt would appoint a commission to investigate

procedures in Liberia. The committee recommended financial reorganization, a loan was received from an international group of bankers, and the US Army intervened with a police force on the border. The end result was that Liberia somewhat stabilized until the advent of World War I. Later, The League of Nations conducted an investigation of labor practices in 1929. They could not substantiate slavery, but were appalled at the abuses that bordered on enslaving others.

All the while, the elite minority continued to rule in an increasingly multi-cultural society, raising ethnic tension. When added to the factors of poverty, dependence on food, and corruption in leadership the implications were lethal. In the 1970's, while the president and his family were creating their own wealth through political office, the Liberian people did not fare so well. Seventy-nine percent of Liberia's population had no access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Seventy-five percent was illiterate. The medical situation was dismal, with one doctor per 9, 778 people. From the years 1971-1978, the population increased twenty-six percent while the food supply decreased.⁶²

In 1974, eighty-nine percent of rice farmers were purchasing rather than growing their own rice. Additionally, the price of imported rice had risen one hundred and twenty-five percent. Rice was Liberia's staple food. To offset what could become a national food crisis, President Tolbert's government decided raise the price of local rice by thirty-six percent, from twenty-two dollars to thirty dollars per hundred pound bag. This increase was a huge setback to the common man, who typically made one dollar and fifty cents per eight- hour workday. ⁶³A demonstration erupted under the watch of police and security. Rioting led to the death of a hundred marchers while hundreds of others were wounded or arrested. William Lloyd Garrison's warning in 1832 was about to prove prophetic:

In every settlement of this kind...vice will soon preponderate over virtue, ... oppression over liberty...The natives will see just enough of Christianity to hate and shun it...Their confidence will be abused—their lands craftily trafficked for naught—their ignorance cheated—their inferiority treated oppressively...what must naturally follow? Why—WAR—a war of retaliation...barriers will be erected...not only of superstition and ignorance, but of hatred and revenge.⁶⁴

In March of 1980, while the president was away, another protest was held. When the leader returned, those who led the rally demanded his resignation. These perpetrators were arrested immediately. On April 12, 1980, while the president and his family slept in the Executive Mansion, a group who called

themselves the People's Redemption Council (PRC) invaded and brutally assassinated the Tolbert and some of his family members.⁶⁵ Under the leadership of Samuel Doe, a Liberian of non-American descent, a military dictatorship ensued. Five years into Doe's regime, a rigged election under the guise of "democracy" proclaimed Doe the winner. Racial discord would once again ignite with Doe's preferential treatment of his own tribe, while discriminating against various ethnic factions. His decade of violence resulted in over 250,000 deaths and forced thousands to become refugees in other countries.⁶⁶

In 1990, however, the Doe dynasty would be disrupted. Enter Charles Taylor, a former official in the Doe Administration, who had been accused of embezzling close to one million dollars from the Doe government. He managed to flee to the United States where he was eventually arrested under international agreements with Liberia. However, while in prison, Taylor managed to escape under mysterious circumstances. This time, he ventured back to Africa, plotting his revenge. He gathered a small army, assisted by Libya's Gadhafi. He trained in Burkino Faso, a country that would ultimately send one thousand troops to support him. In December of 1989, Taylor's rebels attacked from the border of Cote d'Ivoire, inciting a civil war. Soldiers from African nations came as part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In September of 1990, Doe was captured, tormented, and executed.⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the war did not end with the death of Doe. The brutality that followed would permeate the nation for the next seven years, to further devastate an already fragile Liberia. ECOWAS would continue to aide what was left of the government forces that fought, controlling most of Monrovia. Meanwhile, rebel soldiers fought while drunk and high on drugs. Civilian murder, rape, and torture were common occurrences. Much infrastructure and most of the public buildings were destroyed. Child soldiers were recruited to serve in the military, carrying AK47's along with explosive devices. After five years of atrocities, Charles Taylor agreed to a ceasefire in 1996. Elections were held in 1997, and Charles Taylor was declared the victorious candidate. Indeed, eighty percent of the people voted, and while results are not disputed, the motivating factor of voters is believed to be fear of war if Taylor lost. During

the campaign, a popular slogan by his supporters was *“He killed my ma. He killed my pa. I’ll vote for him.”*⁶⁸

The violence subsided, but it did not cease. Taylor followed the tradition of corruption in government, and chose not to invest in the country. Instead, he lined his own pockets and funded a revolution in neighboring Sierra Leone. In 2002, rebel fighting would once again break out near the Guinea border, leading to more bloodshed. In August of 2003, after much international pressure, Taylor would finally go into exile in Nigeria, and a transitional government was appointed.⁶⁹ In 2010, he was entering the second year of his trial at the Hague by the International Crimes Court, accused of eleven counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity for his involvement in both Liberia’s and Sierra Leone’s civil wars. Investigations are ongoing to uncover what happened to the millions he stole from his country.⁷⁰

Today the Republic of Liberia is still feeling those reverberations wrapped in cruelty and fear. The current president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, was democratically elected in 2005, to become the first female head of state in Africa. While she is popular overseas, there is still an element of distrust among Liberians. Sirleaf initially supported Taylor’s overthrow of Doe’s government, a mistake she openly acknowledges.⁷¹ In spite of this, she has a vision for her country and has put her words into action. Her focus is on peace, security, economic revitalization, and governance and rule of law.⁷² Becoming self-sufficient is her top priority, a realization she believes is possible in ten years. During Sirleaf’s reign, many hospitals, clinics, and schools have been constructed. Education is now compulsory and free, and enrollment has risen 40%.⁷³ Safe drinking water, sanitation, and health remain issues, as are the massive undertakings of recreating infrastructure, buildings, and the economy. Rebuilding the human psyche is another monumental task. Two generations grew up in a civilization known for brutality and mass rape; ninety-two percent of Liberian women currently report having experienced sexual violence. As children were recruited to participate in the carnage, the view of normalcy is distorted. The severity of the problem spilled into our own country in July 2009, when four boys (ages fourteen, thirteen, ten, and nine) in Arizona lured an eight-year-old girl into a shed for a piece chewing gum, and proceeded to gang rape her instead. All parties involved were Liberian refugees, illustrating the long-term damaging effects of

this war.⁷⁴

Nevertheless, much of the world is watching, eager to see if this African settlement moves forward to create a new future. After all, Liberia began as another experiment in democracy proclaiming all men were to be created equal. Just like their American model, this African counterpart ended up in turmoil and racial conflict. Liberia's fatherland was able to work through tremendous issues of prejudice after its civil war; today it boasts a president of African American descent. Perhaps Liberia, another nation founded on freedom, is finally on the journey to recovery, hoping to repeat history once more.

"Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it." ~ Abraham Lincoln, 1859 letter to Henry Pierce of Massachusetts⁷⁵

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